Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2011
Sport et société / Animals and the American Imagination

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With an Introduction by Nathalie Cochoy

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Édition électronique
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5676
ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur
AFEA

Référence électronique
Rick Bass, « The Evolution of an Activist », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2011, mis en ligne le 22 juin 2012, consulté le 04 mai 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5676

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Introduction
Rick Bass, l'art de l'approche
Nathalie Cochoy

1 Avant de devenir écrivain, Rick Bass fut ingénieur géologue, spécialisé dans l'étude et la détection des gisements pétroliers. De sa formation, il a sans doute gardé une fascination pour les profondeurs indicibles, littéralement incompréhensibles, du temps et de la terre. Dans ses essais, dans ses nouvelles[1], Rick Bass allie la rigueur et la minutie d'une approche scientifique et l'infini respect d'une démarche poétique éminemment consciente des limites des mots — car il est des choses qui, soumises aux mesures, aux dissections et aux arpentages, s'esquivent et disparaissent. À la visée directe du regard prédateur, Rick Bass préfère la vigilance inquiète de l'animal traqué. Il ne mesure pas les montagnes mais il se laisse estimer par elles ; il ne décrit pas les daims, les cèdres ou les flocons mais il se laisse observer par eux. Il ne cherche pas à s'approprier les mystères de la nature mais seulement, transitoirement, à leur appartenir.

2 C'est ainsi dans la matière même de ses mots que Rick Bass donne à voir son « engagement », amoureux avant d'être militant. Plastique et malléable, son écriture s'harmonise aux lentes mutations saisonnières comme à la magie fulgurante de l'instant — elle suit le vol volontaire d'un corbeau qui puissamment déchire les transparences de l'hiver ou le daim sauvé des glaces qui, dans une miraculeuse explosion d'étincelles, brise son manteau de verre et s'enfuit dans les bois. À force de précisions, elle confère aux noms une intensité fabuleuse — elle dit l'aigle doré, la chouette boréale, le canard arlequin, la salamandre Cœur d'Alène, la truite coupe gorge, le soulier de Vénus, la fougère ou le lys tigré. Elle éclaire dans le connu ce que Jean-Luc Nancy nomme si justement un « avoir lieu de l'inconnu ».

3 Mais comme le montrent les entrelacements de références littéraires (à Thoreau, encore et encore, mais aussi Abbey, Harrison, McCarthy ou Carver) et de souvenirs anecdotiques qui parcourent les essais, comme le montrent aussi les histoires d'amitié, d'amour, ou de blessures communes qui émaillent les nouvelles, c'est d'abord au nom des hommes que Rick Bass révèle la valeur essentielle des paysages naturels. Car « nous avons besoin des espaces sauvages pour nous protéger de nous-mêmes ».

4 En ce sens, *The Book of Yaak* (1996)est sans doute le plus audacieux des livres de Rick Bass. Peut-être est-il aussi, avec *Winter* (1991), le livre fondateur d'une écriture admirablement intègre, qui trouve dans la conscience douloureuse de son écartèlement entre l'art et l'action le lieu d'émergence d'une voix singulière, à la fois détachée et sensible, résolument combative et délicatement pudique. Dès la première phrase, « I shiver, as I write this », *The Book of Yaak* se présente comme un texte alliant dans un même frisson l'urgence et la réticence d'un écrivain face à la nécessité de révéler les intimes et ancestrales splendeurs d'un lieu menacé par une déforestation massive, évoquée en termes de plaie, de cancer ou d'abcès. Depuis vingt ans, Rick Bass écrit et habite la vallée du Yaak, cette zone frontalière, au Nord des Rocheuses, ce fragment de *wildness* et de vérité. Dans l'essai intitulé *Winter*, il décrit son installation, avec son épouse Elizabeth, dans les silences patients et passionnés de la vallée. Dans *The Book of Yaak,* il entrelace les stigmates chiffrés de la déforestation et des éclaboussures de poésie d'une telle intensité qu'elles confinent au sacré. Cet essai, dit-il, est un fragment de *Yaakness* — un morceau de roc, un crâne d'ours, un bois d'élan, une plume de héron. Ou une souffrance partagée comme un secret.

5 « The Evolution of an Activist » s'inscrit dans la continuité de *The Book of Yaak*. Rick Bass adopte ici une voix collective afin d'évoquer son cheminement militant vers un sommet lointain — la préservation de la vallée. Mais à la méditation étonnamment lucide sur un investissement commun se mêlent les linéaments d'un rêve plus intime — celui d'un homme qui souhaite revenir à l'essentielle valeur de la vie ordinaire. L'écriture de Rick Bass tient en effet sa force et sa beauté de la manière dont il prêteson regard et sa voix à un paysage menacé, mutilé, effaré — dont il lui *donne*, littéralement, *sa parole.*

6 Mais en vue du silence.

The Evolution of an Activist
Rick Bass

7 We lack money, and we lack a political constituency. Increasingly, the world's independent scientists are coming to understand with greater clarity and urgency the importance of the Cabinet-Yaak country to the surrounding ecosystems and wildlife populations (particularly the grizzly bear)—but as ever, the wind that's always been in our face remains ever thus: only a hundred and fifty humans reside in the upper Yaak. Without great gobs of cash, though, how are we to influence a president, or 100 Senators representing 270 million people? How, even, are our seventy-five members able to help influence management direction on 2.4 million acres of national forest?

8 Again and always, the Kootenai remains the world-in-a-nutshell, a quagmire of conflict: and yet frustratingly, and seemingly paradoxically, a creative solution exists just within reach, requiring but even a little imagination. With so many elements, so many pieces fractured or disassembled how can there not be a desire, a challenge, to put them back

together? Surely not with the original elegance of design, but still, just as surely, in some more complete fashion than the present disarray?

9 Nearly every single major management issue contributing to the decline of the American wilderness is present right here at home, ranging from mining to endangered species to dams to weeds to ATVs to clearcuts. We hurl ourselves at these issues, year after year and decade after decade, not just by saying *No*, but by offering proposals, solutions: all the while, drawing immeasurably and intangibly closer to our goals of wilderness protection —we can *sense* this, can feel it with our Yaak-intuition in almost the same manner that, on some certain days, you can catch the scent of a band of elk that has just passed through the forest in front of you, or even the sweet scent of a torn-up rotting log, claw-ripped by a grizzly moments earlier, the ants still swarming from the log—and yet all the while, we watch the hour-meter of our lives spin faster and faster, watch our lives spill out beneath us, as if through some never-patched rend.

10 We are all middle-aged now, up here in the Yaak, stretched beyond-thin; more fragmented in some ways than the landscape itself. The land still has a chance of healing, of someday closing in again on itself, and being repaired, even if a hundred or two hundred years from now.

11 Where is the healing for our lives, and their slipping-away?

12 Again, and ever, wilderness is the only answer to this question and so many others, the gold standard that will let us lay down our arms and retire in justice, with the security of permanent protection for wild country. And every year that goes by without it is another loss.

13 In my middle-agedness, I have taken to looking at my own life from a more detached perspective. I have come to realize that for my own self, I have been following what I think of as the Four Stages of Anonymity.

14 In these middle years, a weariness is too common to most of us, along with a desperation to resolve this imminently-solvable problem, and to apply our lives—these brief lives—to more productive matters, while we still can.

15 The people who live in the Yaak are different, for better and for worse, from those in the rest of Lincoln County. Everyone up here—whether wilderness lover, or selfish wilderness hater (the latter wanting the benefits of living in this green land, but caring for none of the responsibilities) moved here to be set apart and away from the madding crowd of the rest of the world: a crowd which seems to grow madder with each passing year. There is no one up here who could not be making more money doing whatever it is they do elsewhere. You would think there would be vast swaths of common ground.

16 But what I've come to see in eighteen years of trying—trying hard—is that for some there will never be common ground; that just as many of us fled here searching for peace and tranquility, so too always will there be a segment of the population drawn or driven to the hinterlands by fury, even hate; and in that anger, they need, sometimes more desperately than life itself, a scapegoat or scape-issue—a bogeyman amongst them—upon which to vent their self-pitying spleen. A symbol, made manifest—even if unfairly, and artificially—of why they ran in the first place.

17 Being bullies, they couldn't hack it in the real world—their anger was too intense, and the world too vast and uncaring, too unresponsive, in a larger community, to that anger, which forced the whiners to hold that anger, that self-pity, within themselves.

18 They couldn't, of course—the anger was too vast—and so they ran for the balm and solitude of the wilderness, as if toward healing. But some of them carried that old poison within them. And to these people—renegade, serial haters—the very concept of identifying common ground, and establishing peace, is then the most frightful and impossible task of all, for it would require the vanishing of their old runaway selves.

19 They have nowhere left to run to, however, beyond the wilderness, and there will always be some who will not, can not, stop hating. Intelligent leaders must therefore allow the haters and self-pitiers to take themselves out of the equation, and to remain on the fringe, where they desire to be anyway, rather than in the center, saying *No* to everything, but offering no common ground solutions.

20 Any leadership that fails to understand this component of the Yaak, or the Kootenai, or any rural community, has always been doomed to failure. Handing over veto power to an individual or cadre whose goals or ambitions are not to build bridges, but to destroy bridges, will guarantee failure; and after some point—say, forty years—it becomes obvious to even a naive idealist such as myself that indeed, certain government and agency representatives *do* understand this, and are therefore not merely complicit in the failure to pass a Yaak or Kootenai wilderness bill, but are, time and again, active participants in the crafting and engineering of that failure.

21 A heartbreaking cycle—a self-defeating corruption of the spirit, and of the community—ensues. Time and again, the agency, and those certain officials, learn to hand over that veto-power to the hatemongers, empowering them sometimes silently and other times with encouragement.

22 And on the other side—the side that engages ever-faithfully in efforts to resolve the different needs—there is waste and failure, betrayal, angst and venom, one more year, one more decade, one more life.

23 #

24 And what, an astute and balanced reader might ask, of the opposite part of the equation of war and gridlock? Are there not environmentalists out there who hate the notion of any logging at all, or any roads? Who also seek to destroy the opposition?

25 Perhaps there are, but they are not in the Yaak: not yet, not now. Probably some day they will be, for do not opposites attract? But right now, there are none--and this is a piece of reconnaissance that most government leaders and agency officials have chosen not to realize. There is a window of opportunity for peace and resolution. There is a handful—a large handful—of environmentalists up here who like to cut trees, and who even believe snowmobiles—though personally abhorring their sound and odor—should be able to travel in certain places on the public lands.

26 The time for resolution is now. A wise leader would assemble a task force comprised of people who want to come to a solution, as opposed to the way government and agency officials have usually allowed these things to proceed, which is again by empowering the people whose goal from the outset is nothing higher than failure.

27 #

28 The nature of all of us up here, then, is anonymity, even if for different reasons—to facilitate war, or to facilitate peace. This desire for non-confrontation—for hiding out, for working in the garden, for taking a solitary hike—is one of the unifying threads among our own group's—the Yaak Valley Forest Council's—supporters. This, I think, makes it all

the more astounding, that such hermits, and such seekers of peace, have banded together and agreed not just to sign our names to a statement, a declaration for permanent protection for the last fifteen roadless areas in the Yaak Valley, but to become activists toward that goal, that need.

29 We all came here like seed-drift, seeking isolation and peace, but have found, paradoxically, that the substrate for that peace, a green and productive and healing land, a diverse and magical land, is being taken from us; that no sooner did we have the good fortune to discover that which we instinctively desired and required, than it began to be taken from us.

30 The choice, then, was to let it go, or to defend it.

31 #

32 In the beginning, and for a long while, I think the non-traditional quality of our activism —the freshness and originality of our approach, treating the challenge not as an implacable war, but simply a dilemma in need of a creative solution—served us well. I think we made some inroads, in the community and within the agency, through what I suppose could be called the artistic or personal approach.

33 Certainly, it was the approach that fitted us; for that was our character, back then. And I think it was effective in part because it was so undeniably personal, so undeniably honest. Coupled with an intimate, on-the-ground knowledge of the places on whose behalf we lobbied, this approach formed, particularly, in our early years, an unassailable defense. To some, it might have seemed a weak link in the chain—the flower-sniffer's approach, or the gambit of the tree-hugger, generally viewed by local folks as the goals of "urban elite Easterners," or some variation or combination of those words—but it was also the one thing that no scientist and no land manager could argue with.

34 They could never say *No, you're wrong*. Without our even knowing it, and out-numbered a hundred to one, we were nonetheless defining the rules of engagement, and the tempo and underlying values of the engagement, whenever we entered a room. *Passion* would be an unspoken value, an identity—what marketing folk would call our "brand."

35 In remembering those early days, I'm reminded of the scene in the Cormac McCarthy novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, where the two young men, John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins, are surrounded by a menagerie of the criminally insane. From day one, the young men are forced to fight non-stop as they try to preserve their own space and hierarchy. And despite the ceaseless batterings and maulings, they keep fighting, even going so far as to seek out the biggest, toughest cons in the jailyard: meeting them more than halfway, taking the fight to them, rather than sitting back and waiting for the next beating.

36 I think our early years were that way. We knew—or if we did not yet know, we soon learned—we would get hammered, for raising and then flying the flag of passion—as if the other side believed that such an emotion could not co-exist with reason—but it was the true flag, and there was therefore no choice.

37 #

38 Things changed, then. We gradually lost, I see now, the privacy and anonymity of those emotions, and that relationship-with-place. We emerged, visible, and our voice became audible. As we had intended, and as was necessary: for in all the years before, silence had not served the Yaak or the Kootenai well.

39 But in that emergence, and that departure from anonymity, there was a loss of innocence —the earlier, halcyon days of peace, even as the foundation of that peace—the land—was being chiseled out from beneath us—and for my own part, I still cannot fully escape from the fantasy and longing for a possible return to those quiet and satisfying days of anonymity: of arising each morning, with no pressing activist's to-do list, but instead with no more concern than the ones of long ago: *What can I do this morning to help make my family happy*, or, *What poem should I work on*, or, *Where should I go for a hike*, or any of an infinite number of other non-warlike considerations—each elicited from the security of knowing that finally the wild fabric, wild braid of this beloved landscape is protected forever.

40 #

41 For better or for worse, then, we came to a fork in the path, and took what seemed to us to be the opportunity to ascend. As if we had been spending years—pleasurable years—hiking around in a serene old growth forest of ancient cedar, larch, and lady's-slippers, down on the valley floor, with the sound of a bright-rushing creek always nearby, and visible sometimes as a silver thread of light weaving through that lush green forest. It was pleasant walking, with sounds muffled and muted by the soft rot of centuries'-old logs, and by the mosses and ferns.

42 It would have been a nice place to stay, but we had stayed there long enough, is what it felt like—or if not long enough, as if it still might somehow be time to be leaving, if we were truly serious about ascending, in this lifetime.

43 Most of us were still in our thirties. Maybe we could have stayed down there a while longer in the old forest. But we saw a path that pitched upward, rather than continuing along the stream, and we left the shade and quiet of the old forest and started up the steeper pitch.

44 #

45 In those subsequent years—the second stage of anonymity, in which our self was lost further to us—we began to engage the issues on different terms. The bedrock of our passion was still within and beneath us, and I think it was the confidence of having established that bedrock, and those parameters, early on, which gave us the security and authority of pursuing now the paradoxically less-firm truths of science.

46 But now we found ourselves engaging with the scientists in their language, and within their borders: sifting, like Bible-belt fundamentalists, through a seemingly infinite and often seemingly-contradictory and fragmented availability of science. Forest pathology, conservation biology, fire cycles and history and science, chaos theory in lodgepole stands, mammalian ecology, coldwater fisheries, geology, soil science, entymology, botany, anthropology, adaptive speciation, mycology, lichenology—a wilderness of -ologies, each beguiling and, sometimes, within the laboratory of a control plot, tantalizingly knowable: or so it would seem on the surface, and in the snapshot of a moment in time, or even the snapshot of a century.

47 Completely lacking, however, is the creator's-knowledge of how each and every part, the known and the unknown, fits into the other, not just at-rest and in that moment's-glance, but moving ceaselessly, from the waves of stone that swell toward and crash against the sky, to the most minute seething exhalations of each and every tree, under all the different conditions, and of the secret chemistries of the soil itself, with its curious requirements of rot, fire, and flood.

48 We learned the most common ways numbers would be misinterpreted or misrepresented —a couple of the hoariest old myths involving the alleged use (versus the preference) of open roads by grizzly bears (yes, when they had to, grizzlies would travel on or across one; but the two corollaries most often omitted were these: that by a two-to-one preference, grizzlies avoided those roads almost completely, in those few places where they still had the option to do so, and, perhaps more to the point, they are more likely to be killed by humans on open roads—fifty to eighty percent of all grizzly deaths in the wild, in the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem, come at the hands of humans; one hundred percent of those mortalities occur within *x* yards of an open road...).

49 Another of the old myths involves the volume of tree-fiber grown on this forest, versus the amount logged, hauled off to out-of-state mills, never to be seen again; never to replenish this thin soil again.

50 Suppose that an errant system of test plots (in which high-altitude rock-and-ice wildlands are treated the same as productive river bottom lowlands) shows that *x* volume of timber is grown on the Kootenai each year, whereas only *y* volume (a lesser figure) is cut.

51 Is not this *x-y* volume uncaptured, then, a horrible waste, queries the pejorative timber flack? (Who all too often cares little for the independent logger or millworker, and too rarely acts on his behalf).

52 The premise is wrong in every which-way, constructed on an assumption that is as static as nature is dynamic and complex. The equation is based further on the premise that there is only one "user" in all of nature, which is man; and that because the interrelated needs of a forest are unknown, they are therefore nonexistent. The need of westslope cutthroat trout to receive hiding cover and clean water filtration from the large downed logs that create oxygenated cooling riffles in their streams has no place in such an equation, nor does the pine marten's time-crafted contract with the world in which it hunts above the snow in winter by traversing a gridwork of fallen logs.

53 The bell-curve grace and dynamism of the roller coaster ride of large-scale landscape and forest ecology has no place in such an equation—how many years out are we, or how many years "in the hole," from the thermonuclear, stand-replacing fires of 1888 and 1910, in which mortality exceeded growth by a factor of several thousandfold?

54 What is the secret hum of each variable, how much fire does a forest need, what are the secret benefits of fire, what percentage of "overstock" (and in what species and size mix, composition and distribution, in a landscape as diverse as the Yaak, and only the Yaak—ecology *must* be place-specific) is required to kindle the type and frequency of fire best suited to keeping a wild and diverse place like the Yaak hale and thrumming?

55 We know how much blind timber a sawmill needs, each year—the same amount, more or less, year in and year out.

56 How much does a flammulated owl need, and a red-tailed hawk? How many perches does a population of goshawks need? How much "timber" does a forest of old growth need, and how much a forest of early-succession conifers ? How much of it should be deciduous, how much coniferous, and in what mosaic, what pattern of distribution ? How much does a mountain lion need, how much a grizzly, how much a band of elk?

57 #

58 In our forays into science—interviewing, reading, and, above all, continuing to hike this land, trying to synthesize our experiences, we came always to the same realization, which

was the point where our hearts had already arrived long ago: the roadless areas were the healthiest places on the forest. In these areas, there was less soil compaction, greater species diversity, greater endemicism. They were qualitatively and quantitatively wilder.

59 Still, too many land managers argued with us, proclaiming that "wilderness" compromised their ability to "heal" or manage these pristine lands. And too many of them were shameless, in their line-item extraction of certain bits of data to argue this point—using not even information, and certainly not knowledge, but *data.*

60 Lynx, for instance, prey on snowshoe hares, which feed in small meadows.

61 Never mind that snowshoe hares (particularly in the Yaak, with its astonishingly unrivaled assemblage of aerial as well as terrestrial carnivores) also require old growth forests right at the edge of a patchworked of small clearings, which the hares can then duck into for protection after having ventured out into those small openings. Never mind that this elegant fire-crafted mosaic of a huge percentage (as much as half of the forest) of very old and fire-resistant ancient forests existing right next to early-seral stage meadows and burned thickets is what existed on the Kootenai (along with lynx and snowshoe hare, as well as the whole of the Kootenai creation) before the era of industrial timber management and liquidation. What too many land managers, including those in the highest reaches of government, will tell you now is that because lynx eat hares and because hare feed in openings (even if only at the edges), then the way to increase lynx populations (an endangered species) is to make more and larger openings (e.g., clearcuts).

62 It was the worst kind of science—*non*-science—with anecdote and partial facts masquerading as process and truth. It was the anecdote of someone's eighty eight-year old grandfather, with a two-pack-a-day cigarette habit, finally getting run over on a busy street by a Krispy Kreme truck. It was the science of the plain and simple, and an affront to the multilayered complexities of time and landscape and the design of this green world.

63 Further frustrating to us was the fact that what little science we did have to go on, in the Yaak, had not been gotten from studies *in* the Yaak (too costly; too time-consuming), and hence was not place-based. What little information we did have was like that which might have been gotten by performing an experiment at different temperatures, in different mediums and cultures, with different strains and species: results, say, from the South Fork of the Flathead, and the whitebark-pine ecotype of the northern Rockies, simply weren't applicable to the low elevation old growth cedar and hemlock forests of the Yaak; and yet again and again, too many land managers attempted to mash and mesh such data onto the Yaak, whenever a certain fragment of data suited their greater objective (which is to say, Congress' greater objective; which is to say, corporate donors' greater objectives), of cutting more timber, and building more roads, than the health of the forest could sustain.

64 It was an extremely challenging and unsatisfying several years, with regard to achieving our long-term goals; but a necessary step, I think, and we did learn a great deal—college education equivalencies, I suspect. We met some awfully nice people, specialists who knew a lot of science but who were merely like nails being pounded by the hammer above them, building the kind of box that the folks in Washington had been told to tell them to build.

65 We learned, during that time, just enough to be able to usually ask the one right question, the weak link in the asserted pseudo-science, to trip up or tangle a manager when he or she proposed something audacious.

66 We did not learn enough to solve the problem scientifically, or in any other quantifiable fashion, but instead found ourselves, at the end of that sojourn, still staring at the obvious solution: anchor the last wild roadless areas with permanent wilderness protection, and enhance their "roundness;" and recover, conserve, and treat with respect the "matrix"—the forest lands and corridors between those roadless areas.

67 We could grope and muscle our way forward, arguing—with the leadership of conservation biologists such as Michael Soule and Michael Gilpin, who stressed, for example, that with grizzlies and other large carnivores, habitat fragmentation (roadbuilding) and environmental stochasticity (clearcuts) were far more injurious to population genetics than any inbreeding that might occur in the next few decades, or centuries—that indeed, disparate patch-sized populations such as the Cabinet-Yaak might indeed be "good as gold," as we'd been saying for years, in that "local populations may go to fixation for different alleles," and "the selection pressures may be different in different environmental patches...[wherein] the genetic variation between patches can be very useful in protecting the species from extinction. Different patches might contain the genetic variants that could survive strong selection pressures, such as a disease, or a change in vegetation."

68 Despite the intellectual expansion, and the personal learning that resulted from taking this path however, there were those among us, myself included, who, the further we traveled from the poetic sensibility and aesthetics, grew more uncomfortable, with a feeling close to homesickness. So what, if in those next several years, we were able to find the science that supported the heart's truth? So what?

69 In this strange and anonymous land of science, the language of poetry was often lost or suppressed. The sensibilities were sometimes there—often just beneath the surface, though other times briefly emergent—but the language itself, with language's shaping and buttressing influences, was as lost from us as might be a mountain trail across a late-spring cornice, or a snowfield in swirling fog.

70 Too many of the agency folks spoke of creating "artificial moose meadows" (clearcuts in swampy areas) or of "regeneration harvests" (clearcuts, period). The language, and the arguments, kept changing.

71 We pushed on up this steep trail, moving through the tangle of a seemingly-endless litany of such phrases and concepts, and, from the shaping of such language, a seemingly-endless series of actions against wilderness, sprouting weed-like from such language.

72 None of it had anything positive to do with wildness, or wilderness. We moved up the trail, wishing for machetes. Even with our heads down and our feet moving forward, it felt as if we were going backwards. It was precisely like moving through a strange and foreign culture, with its customs and values alien to us. The task was to remember the fire in our hearts, and the wild forests' innate beauty. Just because any of us—whether scientist or poet, no matter—had learned all that we could learn, all that we could physically and intellectually and even artistically process, did not mean that any of us were now qualified to lift the barriers from, and open the gates to, more active management (timber extraction, roadbuilding, mining, grazing, etc.) on the public's last roadless areas.

73 The fact that any of us had learned just about all that we could learn really meant nothing at all. Against the world and the wilderness, even the most substantial data-bank was merely apocryphal, in the fixed blink of human history on this land, a tiny speck in the vast fabric of connections still so mysterious and unknown to us that not only do we not know the answers, we don't even know what the questions should be.

74 Such a realization, as we moved through the realm of science, again had the effect of making us look wistfully over our shoulders at the valley floor below. The serene old forests of poetry seemed ever-further distant, yet it seemed important to push forward, rather than turning back toward the country which, though beloved to us, the exploration thereof had not yielded to us even a single of the fruits of our ambitions. Our needs.

75 #

76 Instead, we have entered the third stage of anonymity—the one farthest from our initial path, and yet the one we hope will get us home. The one we hope does not instead trap us, as if in purgatory, for the rest of our allotted time. It's the ultimate hurling-of-one's-self over the precipice, the ultimate giving-over to vanishing—leaving the forests and the science, and venturing instead into the teakettle-whistle of politics—the ultimate nemesis of peace and serenity.

77 Nothing but fog swirling around us now, and icy winds.

78 We began to travel to Washington, D.C., to visit our one Representative (a Republican), both Senators (one Republican, and one Democrat, in a heavily Republican state), and to visit key Forest Service people, in an attempt to make the Kootenai issues—and opportunities—personal. We went to Missoula and Kalispell regularly, visiting with regional leaders, and with the Congress people's aides and staff, and increased our meetings with local elected officials, including the all-important county commissioners, who have the single largest say on the management of these two-plus million acres of public land, and yet who are regularly elected by a voter turn-out of only three thousand people.

79 We began to learn things about which we'd previously had no earthly idea—election cycles, Senate rules of agreement and engagement, cloture, campaigning; about the secret animosities and personal intrigues between parties—and were discouraged, disappointed, to understand how truly long the odds were against any kind of bipartisan success. I'm not proud to say it took us two full years to figure out that any solution we finally helped craft would have to be embedded in an economic development package, in order to please the most powerful interests: the folks who were good not just at pushing bills through, but at holding up other bills (such as wilderness proposals).

80 It took us two full years of naivete and idealism to learn that indeed, it—forward motion—was always going to be about the Benjamins.

81 And as with our journeys through science-land, and, previous to that, through poetry-land, we gradually took on the language of that landscape, losing ourselves in a still-further terrain for which we had no map, and through which we had never traveled. And again I would not be surprised if in assuming that different language, we were not then shaped differently, lathed by the words we chose to speak, and by the words that surrounded us: every bit as shaped, slowly and eventually, as the earth itself is shaped and lathed by the turn of the seasons, by frost and thaw and fire and ice, by rivers and wind; or as any one individual animal, or any one species, is shaped by the landscape, and

by time, accommodating and negotiating that one species' needs and desires with that which the earth has available to give. Negotiating with the world in contested territory, over contested resources.

82 The language of wind and drought and wildfire, of predator and prey, of solstice and equinox and snowfall and shade and light, the language of sulphur and manganese and potassium, of antler and claw and feather, of black soil and red soil, of ash and leaf-litter and spring-seep and glacier and blossom—all of it, the infinite lexicon, has shaped every living thing in this green world, and every non-living thing that preceded our grand arrival—curve of hill, cleft of mountain, slope of boulder, angle of repose—and from that language, and that shaping, each time-carved item, the living and the non-living, possesses a grace, elegance, and integrity of a long-ago and organic yet dynamic solution.

83 In this third stage of anonymity, however, we traveled still-further from that language, and those values and sensibilities. As if totally lost now—ascending, we still believed, toward our goal, but lost, or rather, maples—we once again took on the language if not the customs of the inhabitants of the land through which we now traveled.

84 Where once if we used clichés and idioms to mark our perceived progress, we might have spoken in terms of *making hay* or *chopping wood*, or even of the modern technological marvel, *cooking with gas*, we now spoke of drawing our swords, and of all the different ways to skin a cat. We talked often about how progress needed to be measured "at the end of the day"—a nebulous parameter that we used to exhort each other on the occasions when we were getting our butts kicked during the middle hours of the day. We came to understand that "cross" is short for *cross-examination*, and delight now in mangling idioms such as "Walk me around the mulberry bush on this one"—*explain to me how this is going to get us wilderness*—and "Go tell them how the cow eats cabbage"—which is a hard one to explain, sometimes meaning one thing, while other times, used with disgust or irony, meaning its opposite; and occasionally carrying both meanings at once. A genteel form, perhaps, of a far more crass and common idiom.

85 We speak now of drive-blocking, of getting the runners on base, of moving the ball down the field, of putting the ball across the goal line. We speak of neutralizing the opposition, and of playing our own game, at our own pace.

86 The trouble with this kind of language—the end-game, break-point consequence, I think—is that once you're into this realm, the old glories and aesthetics of *process* are, by unspoken absence, now tossed out of the equation. Implicit in every beat of every heart is result, and result only, as if in a "real" game of sport. There are still rules of engagement but now implicit or even explicit in the language is the sound and sense of a ticking clock. And ever-present, then, is the extra stress and anxiety of a finite capital of time, against which to spend one's resources.

87 You don't know how much time—you try to extrapolate—but sometimes it's hard, especially in a game situation, to see much farther than a few months, or at best, a year—four seasons—down the field, with the clarity you wish to possess.

88 Generally, and then quickly, you begin to throw everything you've got at it, as you would in any arena in which a finite amount of time was left, as opposed to, say, the leisurely rest of your life. Your pace quickens steadily, insidiously, ratcheting up not just to ceaselessness, but to a ceaseless sprint. You bring everything you can to every day, every opportunity, every meeting.

89 Nearing the summit (and you have to believe it is the real summit, and not a false one), more and more connections seem to establish themselves—*this* idea connecting to *that* person, who connects to *this* policy preference, which connects to *this* economic opportunity, which dovetails with *that* certain federal lands directive or policy—until it seems that you will be driven crazy by the lucidity—the nearness of the picture before you, that which you have always longed for and needed, wilderness designation, and the protection of wild country.

90 You can see it through the fog now, as if all the pieces are already assembled, and it is neither art nor science that has brought the traveler this final distance, or this near-final distance, but the hard and not always-fair edges of politics.

91 And rather than being able to pace yourself, now, with the picture, the opportunity, so near—visible through the patches of fog—you hurry, before the obscuring fog shifts and takes key pieces, key players, out of sight again, not to be revealed for, what, another ten or twenty years? Another forty?

92 It was this way back in 1992, when Montana's then-Representative Pat Williams (D), following intense lobbying, in which he received hundreds of letters from people asking for wilderness protection for the last roadless areas in the valley, graciously amended his wilderness bill to include 154,000 acres of special protections in the Yaak. That bill easily passed the House with 302 votes of bipartisan support—were the good old days only as recent as that?

93 I remember hearing the news while in New Orleans. I remember the precise combination of joy and relief I felt—the jubilation for the sake of wild country, and future generations, but also for my own self. I remember specifically the joy and relief of thinking, *All right, now my life can start again—my* real *life—and there is still plenty of it left*.

94 The trouble (as well as the irresistible opportunity, the nearness of the goal) is that once your life disappears into this third stage, there is no turning back, but instead, only victory or loss—attainment or non-attainment—or, I suppose, eternal limbo, eternal purgatory, on this last path, and at such an unrelenting pace, which provides neither the alleviative balm of poetry nor the intellectual stimulation of science. *Hardball*, they call it, and it becomes eventually, the nature of every hour of every day, attempting to eventually fill every crack and fissure of the fabric of your life with that ever-present stress of a hyper-awareness of time, and your position in the game.

95 In this third land, this third kind of anonymity-from-the-real-self, there are, almost as if in cruel teasing, occasional glimpses of paradise regained—of the tempting, more pleasant lower-lands below, through which you've already passed.

96 Less than a week ago I experienced, like the rarest of gifts, an entire day filled with the quality of older, longer-ago, non-political times: a true summer's day.

97 The girls had been out of school for less than a week and were enrolled in a three-day summer volleyball camp that began at eight in the morning. They had a friend spending the night for a sleepover party. We arose early and drive over the mountain and down to town for that day's three-hour session.

98 From there, we went straight to their swimming lessons, then took a leisurely lunch at the little coffee shop in town, the restaurant unoccupied by anyone else, with time seeming to slow to a lazy standstill. The solstice was still nearly two weeks off. There would be tennis lessons in town later that evening, so we had one of those rarest and

sweetest of things, time on our hands. We sipped our milkshakes and ate our sandwiches and talked about anything. Jokes the older girls used to play on their younger siblings. Silly stuff. There was a ceiling fan spinning quietly above us, as if somehow governing the slower pace of the day.

99 From there we walked to the park by the big river, and played—no one was out, mid-day—and from there back to the softball field, where the four of us fielded a spotty team.

100 The crack of our bat drew other children from their nearby homes, however, and soon the field was filled. We played for an hour, rotating through a metamorphosis of strange rules and alliances, until a child came riding up with a football, at which point we walked over to the football field and began playing football.

101 Another child rode off on her bike, then came back a short while later with a covered dish of brownies that her mother had baked. The brownies disappeared as if before locusts.

102 A soccer ball was produced, after the football game ended, and the children practiced their goalkeeping skills. Then the girls and I said goodbye and drove up to the little lake above town—again, no one else was present—and canoed around on it, while scarlet tanagers and yellow warblers flitted amongst the lakeside willows and alders.

103 Finally it was time to head back down to the tennis lesson, followed by an ice cream cone, and then the hour's drive back up into the Yaak, where the girls watched a movie, then played Monopoly until midnight, with blue dusk only recently having turned over to night.

104 A computer-free day, a telephone-free day--a complete absence from the War Machine. There would of course be double-work to make up for the next day—if I was serious about trying to close in on what sometimes seemed, and seems, to be an approaching opportunity to secure permanent wilderness protection for the valley's wildlands, and with a similar clock ticking, out on the landscape itself—but for that one halcyon day, I had not heard the clock. And it is the type of day I envision, and sometimes glimpse, whenever I look back.

105 #

106 Even such a day as that one, however, seems marked in part by a residue of the frenetic, or the overfull. Perhaps—hopefully—the fourth stage will be the anonymity of success. The traveler will know that he or she has reached the end of the third path—the summit—only when there is no more uphill remaining. Even if there is obscuring fog all around, no matter; there will finally, and perhaps seemingly-suddenly, be a complete absence of uphill trudge, with nothing but clean air, clean space, in all directions.

107 For this traveler, then, there will be no lingering. I will turn around and head back downhill as quickly as possible. Running, then, from that which I once sought, back toward that which I never wanted to leave. A prisoner to the sometimes ambiguous demands of love, released finally, with some life still remaining to be lived.

108 -End-

NOTES

1. Citons quelques essais: *Winter* (1991), *The Lost Grizzlies* (1995), *The Book of Yaak* (1996), et quelques recueils de nouvelles: *Platte River* (1993), *In the Loyal Mountains* (1995), *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* (1997), *The Hermit's Story* (2002), *The Lives of Rocks* (2006)...

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